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ABSTRACT

This guide, which is organized in a question-and-answer format, is designed to answer questions commonly asked by employers interested in establishing workplace literacy training programs. The questions and answers have been grouped in sections on the following topics: the extent of the employer commitment required to establish a workplace literacy program and possible sources of assistance; the planning and needs identification process; program options; the logistics of conducting an onsite program without disrupting work flows; potential problems; and evaluation of workplace literacy programs. A list of helpful contacts regarding workplace literacy programs and 12-item resource list conclude the guide. Accompanying the guide is a set of information/guidelines sheets on the following topics: working for change, facts and figures, defining literacy and dispelling myths, first steps, key partnerships, and making words work. (MN)

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Workplace Literacy

An Introductory Guide for Employers

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A Message from the Chairman of the Board of Directors of ABC CANADA

ABC CANADA is a non-profit organization that encourages literacy initiatives by the private sector. Its board members are drawn from management, labour, government and education — a complete cross-section of Canadian leadership.

I could give you any number of reasons why some of us have become actively involved in promoting literacy in the Canadian workplace. But there is one powerful reason why many, many more should be concerned . . . poor literacy skills are part and parcel of Canada's crisis in competitiveness. Literacy is the key to acquiring the skills that workers and employers need. Yet there are more than a million functionally illiterate workers on the job today.

You can't put quality goods and services into world markets, at competitive prices, without a skilled adaptable workforce. However, business has failed miserably when it comes to making a long-term commitment to the training of all of our workforce.

Business and labour leaders must take action. We need to speak with our human resources directors, our plant managers, our shop foremen, our employees. Get their first-hand reading on the literacy level of the company workforce. See if they think that the company is ready to meet the challenges of the national and global marketplace.

For those of you who are prepared to take action we have prepared this guide in the hope that it answers some of your questions about workplace literacy training programs.

W. E. Ardell
Executive Vice President & Chief Operating Officer
Southam Inc.

Workplace Literacy
An Introductory Guide for Employers

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ABC CANADA would like to thank the author Sue Waugh. It was Sue's skills, combined with her patience, flexibility and good humour, that made the production of this work both interesting and enjoyable.

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Making the Commitment

1 What kind of commitment must I make to improve literacy in my workplace?

Literacy in the workplace requires a long-term commitment; there is no quick fix. Literacy skills upgrading should be built into your company's strategic plan. Literacy is not an add on — it must be tied into existing priorities.

This long-term commitment will require you to:

- get senior management support
- get union support (if you have a union)
- budget funds for needs assessment, program development, training and temporary replacement costs
- delegate one person in your organization to administer the program
- develop strategies that go beyond just offering a workplace literacy program.

2 How much will it cost to run a workplace literacy program?

The cost of a workplace literacy program will depend on many factors:

- the objectives of the program
- the length of the program
- the number of participants
- the education partners you choose (their costs and services vary)
- whether or not your employees are unionized
- your geographical location

You will be expected to provide or subsidize:

- employees' wages while attending programs
- facilities and learning resources
- employees' time off work for needs assessment and planning
- program administration

Some provincial governments may provide funding for start-up costs or for pilot projects. Similarly, the National Literacy Secretariat, Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada, may fund projects that have a national scope.

3 Where can I get assistance to set up a literacy program at my workplace?

The variety of available resources will depend on where you are located. The following is a sample of those that can help you develop a workplace literacy program tailored to your needs:

- school boards
- labour organizations
- community-based literacy groups
- non-profit organizations
- community colleges
- private trainers

You will want to ensure that the resource you choose will understand your company's needs. Experience and sensitivity in working with adults will be important criteria for selection.

4 I own a small business and have five employees. How can I offer a workplace program?

Small businesses have to be innovative in responding to literacy needs.

You may be able to work with your professional or trade association to set up a program with other small businesses in your industry. You could approach your industrial training council to offer a program with other small businesses from different industries. One-on-one tutoring outside the workplace may be a workable alternative.

5 My workforce is multicultural. What are some of the things I should consider in starting a literacy initiative?

In a multicultural environment your employees may have varying degrees of literacy skills in more than one language.

- some will be literate in their first language and others will not
- some may need to upgrade both oral communication and literacy skills in their second language
- others may need to upgrade literacy skills only

Any workplace programs, including literacy upgrading, must respect the cultural differences between participants. The programs may also be useful in enhancing communications among the different cultural groups in your workplace.

Workplace literacy upgrading programs alone will not address all the communication and related issues specific to multicultural workplaces. You may also want to provide training in how to manage a diverse workforce for supervisors and managers. You may want to see how your organizational policies and procedures could be adapted to improve relations and communications.

Getting Started

1 Who should be involved in the planning stages?

Ideally, you should establish a task force representing all categories of employees: supervisors, front-line workers, senior management. This task force can guide the entire process of developing a workplace literacy initiative in your workplace. Choosing members who are well respected is important. They will have to build enthusiasm for the project and help to maintain momentum once it gets going. In small workplaces, one or two people may suffice to manage the process.

With unions, it is important to collaborate from the very start through established management/labour structures. In fact, it may be more appropriate for the union to take the lead role in setting up a workplace literacy program, with support from management. Employees may get more involved in a workplace literacy program where there is strong union support and involvement. In any event, ignoring the union will most likely kill any initiative before it gets off the ground.

You will want to involve an education partner once you have established your objectives and priorities.

2 How do we identify needs?

First, you must identify how literacy fits into existing organizational and training objectives. Second, you should try to get a sense of your employees' perceptions. What are their concerns about literacy and how can they be addressed? Third, it is important to assess the changing literacy requirements of jobs. Individual assessments come much later in the process, only after employees have agreed to participate in a program.

The use of standardized testing of the literacy skills of employees is not advised for a number of reasons: traditional paper and pencil tests do not adequately measure the complex set of skills that enable people to do their jobs; they often measure only grade levels which have little relevance to the needs of employees and their workplace; tests can be threatening, reinforcing any negative feelings people may have had about learning in the first place. Other assessment techniques, including personal interviews with employees, can provide the information necessary to set up an effective program.

Determining Options

1 What are some of the ways I can address literacy at my workplace?

What you decide to do will depend on the following factors:

- available resources in your community
- the needs of your workplace and workers
- culture of the organization
- company size and resources

You may decide to implement one or a combination of the following options:

- hire a trained adult educator to offer literacy upgrading in a group setting
- offer peer tutoring by workers or volunteers from outside the workplace
- integrate literacy training into existing training programs
- train in-house trainers so they are more sensitive to the literacy needs of participants
- improve the clarity of print material

2 When and where should a program happen?

Again, this depends on your specific needs. Programs can take place on or off-site, any time of day. It's often more convenient for employees to take programs right at the workplace. On the other hand, employees may be more comfortable learning off-site. Programs are often scheduled near the beginning or end of shifts to accommodate the largest number of employees.

The most successful programs are often those where employees are paid for at least half the time of attendance.

3 Who decides the content, shape and structure of a program?

Successful programs are those that consider both organizational and worker needs. Therefore, it makes sense that program participants should play an integral part in determining how their own learning will take place. The other contributors will be management, the union and the educational partner. Content may be work-specific, general (in that it meets the personal learning objectives of the participants) or a combination of both.

4 How long before we see results?

There is no set length for a workplace literacy program. The time necessary will vary with the program objectives. In this respect, each workplace is unique.

However, programs that are either too short or too long can cause frustration. A long one may erode participants' motivation; too short, and both the employees and the organization may feel they have not accomplished much. When in doubt, a shorter program is more likely to leave the participants wanting more, with their enthusiasm intact.

Sorting Out Logistics

1 How can I offer a program at my work site without disrupting the flow of work?

Foresight and planning are the keys to ensuring uninterrupted production. For example, you will need to plan and budget for replacements or overtime when employees are attending a workplace program.

2 How do I encourage my workers to get involved in a program?

How you talk about literacy is important. The word itself may have a negative connotation to your employees. Therefore you should present your program as something positive wherein employees can build on skills they already have. Present it as an opportunity that will assist workers in meeting their own as well as company goals. Emphasize that there are areas in which all employees, including management, may need to upgrade their skills.

Reassure employees that all individual results are confidential and that attending a program will not affect their employment security.

Give your program a good, catchy name.

Caution!

Are there problems I should watch out for?

Calling a program a *literacy* program will reinforce the stigma often attached to literacy and may finish a program before it starts. Be positive! Basic skills upgrading is not something you do to 'fix people up' because they are deficient. In other words, don't blame your employees for the fact that they need to improve their literacy skills. Avoid such words as "*illiterate*" and "*illiteracy*".

Singling out employees who you think need a literacy program may result only in resentment; they will probably distrust your motives. In fact, your assumptions may limit opportunities for everyone. Instead, offer all employees the opportunity to upgrade their skills. By involving all levels of the workforce in suggesting and planning programs, you will likely find that people will accurately determine their own needs.

Evaluating the Results

1 What are the benefits?

According to employees and employers who have used workplace literacy programs, the benefits are many:

- ***Better customer service and quality control***
- ***A more effective workforce***
  - –through building transferable skills
  - –through qualifying more workers for cross-transfers and promotion
  - –through greater knowledge and understanding about the company and its products or services
- ***Ability to manage change***
  - –by bridging the gap between old and new technology through training
  - –by ensuring employer compliance with W.H.M.I.S. legislation
  - –by developing a highly-skilled workforce to meet the demands of a new and complex marketplace
- ***Improved communications***
  - –within a culturally diverse workforce
  - –among all employees and among the various levels within a company.
- ***Improved workplace environment***
  - –higher morale and team spirit
  - –more individual job satisfaction
  - –better industrial relations
  - –fewer accidents and health problems

2 How can I evaluate the impact of a workplace program?

First, you will want to get anecdotal information from program participants, their supervisors, senior managers, union representatives and your project team. Then, in the medium to long-term, you can assess the effects on turnover rates, productivity, promotional patterns and other measurable areas. These two steps will give you a measure of the success of your program and will help to identify changes or further needs.

Helpful Contacts For Literacy In The Workplace

The National Literacy Secretariat
Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0M5
Tel: (819) 953-5286

The Secretariat has produced several publications on literacy issues including workplace literacy.

Business Council for Effective Literacy (BCEL)
1221 Avenue of the Americas
35th floor
New York, New York 10020
Tel: (212) 512-2415/2412

BCEL produces a number of publications, including an excellent newsletter, free of charge.

The National Adult Literacy Database (NALD)
Fanshawe College of Applied
Arts and Technology
P.O. Box 4005
London, Ontario
N5W 5H1
Tel: (519) 452-4484

NALD provides information on literacy services across the country.

For more information, call ABC CANADA (902) 492-2665.

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   This booklet will be of interest to employers who want to get an overview of workplace literacy. It includes a description of different approaches, potential service providers, do's and don ts and answers to some common employer questions about workplace literacy.

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   This book is of interest to practitioners as well as employers. It examines practical solutions, program approaches and instructional techniques, as well as resources. The 35 authors write from their experience in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom.

4. Business Council for Effective Literacy, *Job-related Basic Skills. A Guide for Planners of Employee Programs.* BCEL Bulletin Issue no. 2. New York (1987).

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   This guide includes an overview of the basic skills employers want and guidelines for setting up basic skills programs at the workplace.

6. Ontario Ministry of Skills Development, *How to Set up Literacy and Basic Skills Training in the Workplace.* Queen's Printer for Ontario. Toronto, Ontario (1989).
   This booklet is a practical guide for setting up basic skills training in the workplace and includes sources of information on workplace literacy.

7. Sarmiento, A. R. and Kay, A., *Worker-Centered Learning: A Union Guide to Workplace Literacy*. AFL-CIO Human Resources Development Institute (1990).
   This guide, written from a labour perspective, is useful for those interested in issues related to literacy and the workplace. It details the how-to's of setting up a worker-centered workplace literacy program.

Plain language

1. Baldwin, R., *Clear Writing and Literacy*. Ontario Literacy Coalition. Toronto, Ontario (1990).
   This document includes practical ideas on clear writing, what makes print material difficult to understand and why it is important to use it.
2. Nore, G., *Clear Lines. How to Compose and Design Clear Language Documents for the Workplace*. Frontier College, Toronto, Ontario (1991).
   This guide discusses the importance and principles of clear writing. It includes guidelines for clear design and steps for implementing clear language.
3. Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada, *Plain Language*. Supply and Services, Ottawa, Ontario (1991).

"Canadian business requires a workforce that is well-trained and adaptable — a condition that is impossible to achieve without a functional level of literacy."

W. E. Ardell
Executive Vice President
Southam Inc.

"There is hardly a social or economic problem that does not have a literacy component."

Paul Jones
Publisher, Canadian Business Magazine

"The best investment Canada can make to secure its future well-being is to invest in the education and training of its workforce."

Maryantonnett Flumian
Former CEO
Canadian Labour Market and Productivity Centre

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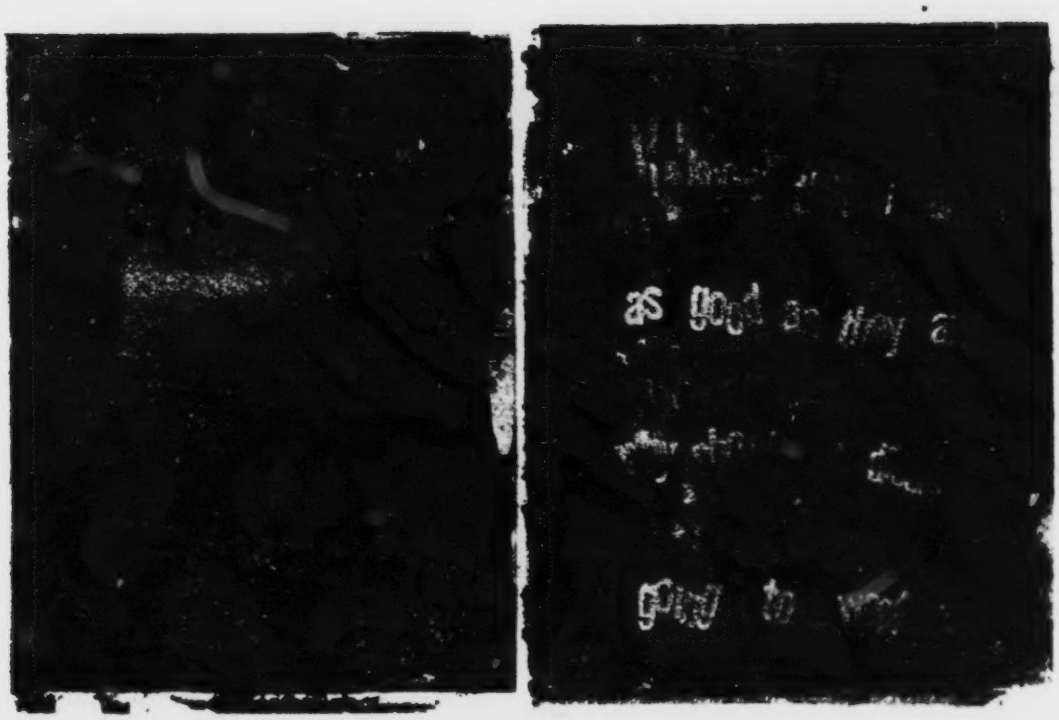

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Workplace Literacy

Six good reasons why employers should get involved

"Canadian business requires a workforce that is well-trained and adaptable . . . a condition that is impossible without a functional level of literacy"

1 It is Key to Staying in Business
Canadian industry faces a double edged crisis. First, we're being forced to compete in a far tougher, more technologically advanced global marketplace than ever before. Second, we know that we must begin to pay more attention to the training of our workforce. Compared with all other industrialized countries, Canada does a woefully inadequate job of training its workforce.

2 It is the Key to Managing Change
The rapid pace of change both in the workplace and in the marketplace means that all of us will need to learn new skills. Our ability to do that will depend on the extent to which we have mastered the basics of reading, writing and maths.

3 It Contributes to Excellence in Customer Service
Customer service is key to success. Employees who can clearly communicate with your customers are critical to providing good service.

4 It is an Investment in People
Roughly 75% of the people who will be in the workforce in the year 2000 are already out of school and in the workforce. It makes good management sense to train these employees. Literacy upgrading should be considered an essential part of your overall training strategy.

5 It Affects Health and Safety in the Workplace
Literacy upgrading can play an important part in ensuring that your company meets the legislative requirements of the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System.

6 It is an Employment Equity Strategy
Upgrading can assist companies in meeting legislative requirements for employment equity. Literacy upgrading may improve employment and promotional opportunities for women, newcomers to Canada, the disabled, visible minorities and Aboriginal people.

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Facts and Figures about Literacy

"Almost 3 million Canadian adults don't have the skills to read most of the written material they see everyday."

Literacy in the Canadian Context

A recent Statistics Canada survey discovered that 16% of Canadians cannot deal with the majority of reading material encountered in everyday life.

The same survey found that an additional 22% of adult Canadians do not have sufficient skills to cope with more complex reading material. They can only carry out reading tasks in familiar contexts.

While 88% of Canadians can write a simple message, only 62% could write a letter requesting the repair of an appliance.

The Statistics Canada Survey found that while 30% of adults born outside of Canada have limited reading skills in either English or French, many are literate in their own language and have good math skills.

Literacy at Work

Most employees are required to read up to two hours a day on the job and reading skills required at work are different than skills required at school. Reading at work frequently requires a specialized vocabulary and the use of complex reading skills.

Of all the jobs created from now until the year 2000, 40% will require more than 16 years of training. Yet, at least 30% of students drop out before finishing high school.

Employers are becoming concerned about literacy. Findings from the Conference Board of Canada show that 70% of Canadian employers think that literacy is an issue in their workplaces.

All surveys point to the fact that Canadian employers do little in the way of the training of their employees. Canadian workers receive far less formal training per year than workers in other industrialized countries.

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Defining Literacy . . . Dispelling Myths

"Functional Literacy is the ability to read and comprehend printed material and do numerical computation well enough to participate fully at work, at home and in the community."

Definition of Literacy

Workplace Literacy refers to the reading, writing, math and problem-solving skills needed at work. These basic skills, along with the ability to listen and communicate orally, are becoming more and more essential in today's work world. Literacy requirements will vary from workplace to workplace.

Workplace literacy can mean many things — both for employees and employers. For the employee, it includes:

- comprehending written instructions and manuals
- meeting customer requirements accurately
- using charts and diagrams

It is essential that strategies to improve workforce literacy skills are built into an organization's long-term corporate plan. One important strategy is to make sure that written materials use clear, concise language.

Myths about Literacy

It is a myth that those with poor reading and writing skills are less intelligent than others.
Those who want or need to upgrade their literacy skills are people with many other skills and strengths.

It is a myth that literacy or lack of it is an absolute condition.
People have varying abilities and needs depending on their interests and life experience. In a rapidly changing society, everyone will need to upgrade his/her literacy skills.

It is a myth that literacy is a disease.
Language that promotes negative stereotypes or likens literacy to a disease should be avoided.

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Setting up a Literacy Initiative at the Workplace

"Literacy programs should be developed only after a thorough needs assessment has been completed."

While there are many ways to set up a workplace literacy program the following guidelines will be useful for any model you choose:

Review your organization
Decide how a literacy initiative might fit into the existing priorities and objectives. Workplace Literacy must be more than a one-time upgrading program for workers. Literacy must be integrated into the long-term plans of the organization

Get support
Commitment is needed from both senior management and employee representatives.

Choose an education resource
Make sure that the education partner you choose can understand and meet the needs of your company and workforce.

Form a project team
Representation should include all levels of the workforce. The team will guide the process of establishing and overseeing the workplace literacy initiative.

Survey your employees
Ask your employees what they think the literacy issues are and what actions could be planned.

Develop a plan
You may, for example, decide to:

- offer specific literacy programs
- integrate literacy into regular training
- rewrite print material in clear language

Plan an evaluation strategy
Do this at the same time you determine your objectives.

Develop a communication strategy
Get employees involved.

Implement and monitor your plan
Get regular input from participants, supervisors and employees or the union to see how things are going.

Evaluate whether or not you are meeting the objectives

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Developing Partnerships

"Employers, unions, and educators must work together to provide continuing learning opportunities for workers in the face of a rapidly changing society and workplace."

Involving the Workforce
You must involve your employees in each step in the development of any literacy initiative. This will assist in developing their enthusiasm and commitment for programs and activities.

Working with the Union
In a unionized workplace, it is preferable to work through existing management-union structures from the outset. The support and involvement of the union is essential to getting your literacy initiative off the ground.

Involving an Education Partner
Once you have established the necessary partnerships in your own workplace, you will need to determine who will design and deliver a literacy program for you. Potential education partners include:

- in-house trainers
- school boards
- community-based literacy organizations
- labour organizations
- community colleges
- non-profit organizations
- private trainers and consultants

Your education partner can help you with needs assessment, program design and implementation. They may also help you assess and adapt your print material.

It is important that the education partner understands the needs of your workplace and workforce and that they can work well with all other partners. If your workforce is culturally and linguistically diverse, you will want to ensure that the educator is sensitive to that environment.

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Clear Language

"There are several factors that make materials hard to read and difficult to understand."

Workplace literacy is more than just programs for workers. It means putting in place a number of strategies. It is important, for example, to implement a strategy which ensures that all print materials produced by your organization are written in clear language.

Well written material will contribute to a better understanding of your company's expectations and requirements:
Materials which should be readily understandable include:

- new employee information
- training materials and manuals
- memos and newsletters

Well written material will contribute to better customer service:
Clear writing will ensure better service to your customers. When you are developing materials for use by your customers remember to take into account that nearly 40% of Canadians are uncomfortable with the printed word.

Factors that Affect Comprehension

Poor Layout and Design
Reading is made difficult by having too much information on a page, not enough white space, all capital letters or light letters on a dark background.

Information Badly Organized
Often there is nothing to highlight main ideas or important information to the reader. Instructions may be unclear.

Difficult Language
Unnecessary complex words, jargon, legal language and acronyms can make reading difficult.

Long Sentences and Complex Structures
Sentences that are over 30 words or those with several ideas can be intimidating for the reader. The passive voice (it has been decided) as opposed to the active voice (the company has decided) can make understanding more difficult.

Negative Tone
Material which is written in a negative, hostile or patronizing tone can discourage further reading.

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